Friendship
John 15:1-17
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WBAA

Friendship, the more one thinks about it, is a rare and illusive relationship. Most of us have two kinds of relationships with other adults: a marital relationship with a husband or wife, and many peripheral relationships which are better termed acquaintances, and not much in between. In fact, it is apparent that within marriage itself, that most intimate of human relationships, friendship is equally rare. Marriage counselors often identify the root of a marital problem as the fact that a man and woman may have learned to be lovers, but not friends: that the years have eroded that distinct kind of relationship called friendship, and that in the middle of life there is not much of anything left to keep the marriage going.

In any case, friendship is rare and illusive. All of us, to be sure, have a circle of friends with whom we play bridge, enjoy evenings together, people with whom we put in more time than with other people. I am suggesting that in most cases this is not friendship, but acquaintance. We know from experience that the deeper we get into it with other people, the more tension the relationship will have to bear. Don Rickels was poking fun at the late Will Rogers when he said, "I've never met a man I couldn't dislike," but he was also saying something profoundly true. For the moment we go beyond acquaintance to friendship, we begin to see another person's faults as well as his appealing qualities. We see him as a person with weaknesses, and idiocyncracies; we begin to see his pettiness and we discover more and more things about him that we don't like. And for many people, it's simply easier not to get that far with anyone. "Good fences make good neighbors." And "guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days." There's a lot of practical, experienced wisdom in those famous observations, and yet there is something about them that ought to make us uncomfortable. For what they are

really saying is that human friendship just may not be possible.

I have a lot of mixed feelings about the fraternity system on college and university campuses. But about one thing I am sure. The system provides an environment for friendship to develop. There is no way to live in a house for several years with thirty or forty other individuals without learning the fundamentals of friendship. For in that context it is impossible to keep people at arm's length. I think that is way those of us who have experienced it look back with fondness: in the same way that veterans look back on service time. I think we sense that life doesn't provide much opportunity for real friendship, and that most of our adult relationships are superficial at best, and phony at worst.

Great thinkers of the past have seen in friendship a rare and beautiful dimension to life. Cicero, Aristotle wrote movingly about friendship. And Buddha, in phrases that sound strangely familiar, describes a true friend as one who "guards you when you are off guard and does not forsake you in trouble; he even lays down his life for your sake."

Christian people are called to friendship. There is no way to read the New Testament without sensing that the Christian life is uniquely different at precisely this point. Christian people are part of a community that is conspicuous, in the eyes of the world, for the way it exhibits love, and understanding and forgiveness and openness and acceptance. It is impossible to read the New Testament without seeing it. Yet it is nearly as impossible to observe the contemporary church of Jesus Christ and notice it. There is a vast discrepency between the standards of the Gospel and the realities of church life at this point. And I, for one, believe that we will never really understand what the church is all about until we deal with it.

The dimensions of the discrepency between what we say and what we do could be documented by anyone, I am sure, who has spent much time working in the institutional church. In his excellent book about life in a Japanese

internment camp during World War II, Langdon Gilkey focuses on the problem- Space was at a premium in the camp, particularly in the sleeping quarters. Nine, ten and eleven people were housed in rooms ten by eleven feet. Most of them were Christian missionaries, Christian businessmen and wives, teachers and British Government officials. It was impossible for this group to arrive at an equitable and satisfactory allotment of space. "Good, educated, enlightened people who could tell other s what Christianity was about, and who were products of Christianity themselves, could not and did not implement that faith in living as a social group in an institutional arrangement.

"At one point the American Red Cross sent fifteen hundred parcels of food to the camp. The Japanese in permitting the packages to be sent suggested that one and a half parcels be given to every American prisoner and that one parcel be given to all other prisoners. But the majority of Americans wanted seven and a half parceds, which was their share if none wer e given to others. In both instances, as in most other problem times, the character of the camp was such that the problems were solved only by recourse to the power and authority of the Japanese captors." (Gilkey, Shantung Compound, Worley, Change in the Church: A Source of Hope, pp34-35)

Christian people often fail at just this critical point: when they are called on to put into practice the ideas of love that constitute the essence of their religion. And it is not confined to dramatic instances such as a Japanese prison camp: it is rarely a case of laying down ones life. Usually our failures happen in the undramatic ambiguity of every day living.

[On the night of his betrayal and arrest Jesus talked with his disciples in very precise terms about their life in the world after he had left them, and part of what he said had to do with . . . ~~Three images emerge from that discourse, part of which we read this morning: the wine and the branches~~, a new definition of friendship, and obedient love as the life-giving source of Christian life.

The vine was a very familiar symbol to them. Everytime they entered the Temple in Jerusalem they saw an image of the vine carved on the gates. Jeremiah and Ezekial both described Israel as the vine, God's own vine Jesus, himself, had used the image many times. Here, however, he was saying something new. He was the vine, and they, individual followers were the branches, related organically to him, dependent on him for life- but equally related to and dependent on each other.

As individual branches, with individual functions, dependent on the vine and each other, he called them friends - and then almost immediately, as if to prohibit the fatal misunderstanding that if they were Jesus friends, they needed no one else, he issued a new commandment: "Love each other". And then quickly, precisely: "There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends."

There are two understandings that are important for us here: the new difination of friendship and the implications for the life of the Church. Let's go back again to friendship. Let's admit that we are all a little superficial in our relationships and see if we can't learn something.

For Jesus, friendship coud be expressed by way of three qualities. First, self=giving He called in laying down one's life, but you and I seldom have the opportunity for that. And to play the safe game of speculating how we would respond if that situation presented itself is irrelevant. The fact is that we give of ourselves, or withhold self, in hundreds of ways every day. But a friend gives - without counting the cost, without calculating what kind of benefits will accrue. A friend extends self into the life of another, particularly when it would be easier and more convenient to retreat. I attended a meeting once in which I took a verbal and emotional beating. When it was over everyone fled- I think rather than having to confront me personally. One person stayed behind and said simply; "I thought you might want to talk a minute or two". That was friendship -

because it was self-giving.

For Jesus, friendship was openness. Think how much he shared with them. His love and affection; His knowledge of God, but even more importantly, His anger, His doubts and agony. He took three of them with him into the garden and made them witnesses to His agony and doubt and tears. ~~Think what that means--to share with your friends your doubt.~~ Think how rarely it is that we can be that open with each other.

I sense that when we really get honest with each other our natural reaction is to retreat, change the subject, do anything to avoid a new level of honesty. I sense that in approaching honesty we cross the line between acquaintance and friendship and most of us aren't sure we want to go that far. But friendship is open, and accepts the other for what he is--not what he tries to be. It encompasses and accepts the other as a human being, a particular individual with particular needs, wants, faults and frailties.

For Jesus, friendship was a matter of trust. Think how he must have trusted them. He gave himself for them; he shared everthing He knew and felt with them; and he trusted that they would be able to carry the load when he was gone. And the amazing thing is that they did very little to deserve His trust. Time and time they let Him down at crucial points. They could not or would not understand who He was; when His arrest was near they were arguing about who among them was the greatest. And even there - around the table of the Last Supper, one of them was preparing to betray Him. Yet he trusted. And in a sense His trust was precisely what gave them the strength when the test did come.

Well, you and I are inclined to come at it from the other direction, aren't we. Trustworthiness must preceed our trusting. With our children, spouses, acquaintances the formula is the same; "demonstrate your trustworthiness, and then I will trust you." And it rarely works.

Jesus is here suggesting that friendship means taking the risk of trust; taking the initiative in trusting. Self-Giving, Openess and Trust- add up to friendship. They add up also to that distinctive quality of love that chacterizes the Christian life, seen most clearly in the life of the Church.

At least that's the model : that's the way things aught to be. And I think the fact that for most people what I have been saying about friendship has absolutely nothing to do with their belonging to the Church is one of the most damaging indictments that can be leveled against us. The fact is that it simply hasn't occurred to many Church people that their belonging means entering into a visible, organic fellowship of friends. That may be what the books say, but the average person joining the Church just doesn't see it as anything but adding his name to another list, not significantly different from the list of PTA members.

And that, I would say from some experience, is at the heart of whatever problems the contemparary Church may be having. We have managed to cut off the life-giving source of the Church-the love of Jesus Christ expressed between people.

Robert Raines comments: "We belong to Christ by belonging to each other.....We have no choice in the matter. Some of our brothers we may like; others we may dislike. But they belong to us, and we belong to them in either case. Because we are involved with Him, we are involved with them. And the reverse is also true: through them we move closer to Him.....we might wish to avoid this horizontal belonging and cling only to Him. But we cannot do so.We belong to Christ only by belonging to each other." (Reshaping the Christian Life P17)

"Through them we move closer to Him". That's how important all of this is. You know, when it comes right down to it the "love of God in Jesus Christ" is just an idea in the mind, just a theological hypothesis - until it

is felt, experienced and made personally real. In some circles that experience is surrounded by great mystery and emotion: when it happens it is soul shattering, and the question of whether or not it is an authentic experience is always justified. In other circles the love of God is just a topic of conversation, discussed a lot, but no more. Missing from both is this simple little New Testament reality that men experience the love of God as they learn to love each other. The love of God in Jesus Christ becomes incarnate in the lives of people like you and me. The idea takes on flesh - the concept becomes real - thehypothesis becomes experienced reality - when ~~Christian~~ people learn to love each other.

We're hiding that from a world that needs it. It is all, in the final analysis, that we have to offer - a new life of love. And we are the vehicle, the model, the community of those people whose love for each other is to be demonstrated for the world to see. And in hiding it from the world we hide it from each other-and deprive each other of the saving knowledge that we are loved of God.

That's what belonging to the Church is all about. Let it happen today-through and in you. Amen

Our Father, teach us to love as you have loved us. Teach us to be open and trusting and self-giving, to each other, that the world may see and know your love for all men. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen